



## Mentorship: Making It Work

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**Abstract:** This article is based on a presentation given at the 2016 Pacific Northwest Library Conference in Calgary, Alberta. The authors examined mentoring best practices and provided analysis of a mentoring program offered through a small library association in Alberta, Canada.

### **Introduction: definition of mentoring and why we need it**

Mentoring gets a lot of buzz these days but it is often defined in broad strokes, for example, the Oxford Dictionary defines mentoring as: "guidance provided by a mentor, especially an experienced person in a company or educational institution". Such a broad definition creates misunderstanding about how mentoring can work and how the relationship should be established. The literature around mentorship provides many perceptions of mentorship. It also provides guidance for the limitations of mentorship:

- Mentorship is not friendship;
- Mentorship is not a guaranteed path to promotion;
- Mentorship is not career planning or counseling;
- Mentorship is not coaching;
- Mentorship does not exist in a reporting relationship; and,
- Mentorship is not unidirectional.

Mentoring has aspects of friendship, such as social interactions and some level of caring about the person, but it is not a personal friendship between people. The relationship could be better understood as a professional team since mentoring has goals that the twosome will work towards. Mentoring does not guarantee a path to promotion or another work opportunity. It is most often focused on the current situation and ensuring that the mentee can develop the skills and knowledge to be successful in their current role. Although coaching conversations can occur during mentoring, the mentor is not a professional coach and cannot lead the mentee to finding solutions for each problem that they encounter at work.

Mentoring does not function well in a reporting relationship. For the relationship to work well, the mentee needs to be free to ask questions and to discuss issues that they are struggling to understand. The fear of looking dumb in front of their supervisor is a significant barrier to the free flow of information in the relationship if the mentor is also the supervisor. Drawing the line between mentoring and supervision is difficult for a mentor and conflicts can arise over the appropriate reaction to information gleaned from a mentoring session.

Finally, the broad definition from the dictionary leads one to believe that mentoring is a relationship where the flow of information and knowledge is unidirectional: from the mentor to the mentee. This type of knowledge migration is rare in mentoring. Mentees often bring new information and new perspectives into the relationship and mentors can benefit from the insights of the mentees as much as mentees can benefit from their mentors.

Entering into workplaces of increased complexity, librarians constantly need to adjust and develop their skills and knowledge. Developing and growing professionally can be difficult for new employees who can be overwhelmed with the expectations to “hit the ground running” in all aspects of their work. New professionals do not often know where to go and who to speak to. They are afraid to ask for assistance for fear of looking dumb. Mentoring can help them become successful by enabling new employees to overcome barriers of accessing information, adjust to their new roles, and learn how to grow within the organization.

Almost everyone is engaged in mentoring in some way in the workplace. Often mentoring is informal and piecemeal through activities like an orientation process or through quick pieces of advice given to new employees. In contrast, structured programs provide clear guidelines on roles and responsibilities of the mentor and mentee.

Mentoring does not need to be limited to the bounds of one workplace. Library associations also offer mentoring opportunities to guide new librarians into the profession through experienced peers in similar roles from other organizations. So, the mentoring engagement can be formal or informal and it can happen in the context of organization, association or peer group. In this article, we examine mentoring as a professional development opportunity through a library association.

### **GELA Professional Buddies Program**

In October 2015, the Greater Edmonton Library Association (GELA) launched its first Professional Buddies program. GELA is a small library association centered in Edmonton, the capital of Alberta. The Board of GELA is usually formed by new professionals who have recently graduated from a MLIS program and the terms for each position on the Board are one to two years in length. Membership is open to librarians, library technicians, library workers, and those interested in libraries.

The GELA Professional Buddies program is one of the first mentoring opportunities offered by a library association in Alberta. The program sparked a lot of interest in the Edmonton library community. The association made a call for mentors - experienced professionals with a strong desire to see less experienced individuals grow, develop, and succeed. There was no requirement membership for those who volunteered. Both authors, librarians with more than ten years of professional experience, signed up as mentors. The mentees, mostly library students and new graduates, volunteered to be matched with mentors. The program aimed to offer an opportunity to share knowledge and provide advice. Participants were matched by pairing the type of library a mentor worked in with the type of library a mentee was interested in working at. A social event kick-started the program and allowed mentors and mentees to meet each other in a safe place and to develop a connection on which to base the mentoring relationship.

### **Analysis of GELA program**

In the advertisements that were distributed, the program was called “open and casual” which described its semi-formal character. The GELA program was developed to encourage a hands-on-experience of mentoring. After the planned social event, it was up to participants to determine how to proceed as no other guidance was provided to either mentors or mentees, and no further communication from the association followed.

For both authors, it was not the first experience of mentoring. Tatiana and Sandra have been mentors for colleagues at their own organizations and volunteered as mentors in other programs outside the workplace. Surprisingly, the authors had very different levels of satisfaction from participation in the GELA Professional Buddies program as their experiences were quite different. Tatiana was paired with a very motivated mentee, a second-year SLIS student. Working together, they set learning goals, frequency of meetings, and topics of discussion. During monthly meetings, they discussed future career opportunities for the learner and the importance of

networking, reviewed the mentee's resume and cover letter samples, checked potential places to gain additional experience, discussed course selection and the engagement in research that could bring the mentee closer to the achievement of career goals.

Sandra was matched with two SLIS students in their final year of study. One student did not attend the kickstarting event and later rebuffed all attempts at setting up future meetings. The second student, who did attend the event and a follow-up meeting, did not have a clear idea of what she wanted to achieve through the mentoring, despite some thorough prompting. Conversation starters about various types of work in libraries fell flat and Sandra was frustrated by what she perceived as a lack of interest in the mentoring process.

Some failure is inevitable when new programs are attempted for the first time. Looking back, Tatiana and Sandra believe that the organization would have created a more successful program if they had spent greater time thinking about the details. Some areas where the program could have been improved are: articulation of guidelines, orientation for mentors, requirements for mentees to develop clear and articulated expectations for their learning, and improved matching of participants. Although setting very generalized guidelines made GELA mentoring less constricted by rules, it also made it less effective overall. Unfortunately, no feedback was requested from participants, so GELA missed on the opportunity to evaluate the program and learn what worked, what didn't, and what could be improved on for future mentoring programs.

The authors applaud the efforts of GELA to set a professional development opportunity for its members. The Board was experimenting with a new idea and did not have previous experience to draw from. During the development of this program, some on the Board were still attending school and working, and their engagement in this program required commendable effort. The authors believe that while the semi-formal approach can work in mentoring, it requires both parties to be quite organized and motivated. After discussing our experiences of mentoring in other organizations and reviewing the literature on the subject, we believe that the chances of success will improve if an association adopts a more formal approach.

The formal programs are more effective for the following reasons:

- Careful and deliberate matches between individuals optimize successful relationships.
- Participants are more likely to achieve program outcomes if the expectations are clearly defined at the beginning.
- Relationships are more likely to last to conclusion when there is a well-articulated plan.
- Clear identification of all roles (do's and don'ts) put participants more at ease.
- Communications are more likely to succeed with supplied topics, projects, and/or resources.

### **What makes mentorship successful**

Like other projects, mentoring programs need to be well planned and managed. A mentoring program should provide guidelines for the mentoring relationship and engage participants in the process of establishing goals for themselves and their partnership. A structured program should bring clarity to what is expected from both mentor and mentee. Participants need to understand the time commitment they are making as well as their roles in the relationship. An in-person orientation is ideal for delivering this type of information but in lieu of that training, documentation should be provided. At the conclusion of a program, an evaluation component should be required to gain insight into failures and successes so that the program can be adjusted to improve outcomes for future participants.

No matter the size of the initiative, structure and documentation should be in place to facilitate

positive relationships. It is ideal if both participants can have some freedom in selecting a mentorship partner. However, many programs rely on the organizing committee to match mentors and mentees as a way of streamlining the process. Matching may be guided by criteria such as library type, role in the library, work interests and experiences, learning or participation objectives, or what workplace issues mentors are comfortable discussing. The mentor relationship is more effective if the participants' interests are aligned.

A possible problem for mentoring programs is a disparity between applications from mentees and applications from mentors. There can be many reasons for this lack of response from potential mentors. Time constraints from full-time work are often a barrier for mentors especially if time expectations are not laid out clearly. For mentoring in the workplace, time constraints can be solved by having work release time for mentors. In mentoring programs run through an association, time constraints for mentors can become a significant barrier and can only be mitigated through a clear description of the amount of time being committed. Another reason for mentor shortage is "imposter syndrome," which as many as 40% of librarians experience at some point in their careers (Clark, Vardeman & Barba 2014). Imposter syndrome is often experienced by high-achieving individuals and is a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist even in the face of information that indicates that the opposite is true. Such feelings can make potential mentors reluctant to sign up and take a new role even though they have ample professional experience. In fact, most mentoring programs require mentors to have only three to five years of professional experience in the field.

An effective way to begin developing a new mentoring program is to examine what other associations have done previously and replicate their best practices. A scan of library association websites reveal that several have run mentoring programs in the past and have posted ample documentation on their sites. Best practices include: efforts to match participants through multiple points of interest, clear guidelines, and a clearly stated length of the mentoring commitment. Some associations have asked participants to sign a contract that lists common goals agreed upon by mentor and mentee.

For more information, we recommend checking out the following sites:

- Academic Library Association of Ohio (ALAO) Mentoring Program: <http://www.alaoweb.org/Mentor>
- British Columbia Library Association (BCLA) Mentorship Program: <https://bclaconnect.ca/professional-development/mentorship-program/>
- Michigan Library Association (MLA) Mentor Program: <http://www.milibraries.org/career-development/mentor-program/overview/>
- Ontario Library Association (OLA) Mentoring Programs: <https://olamentoring.wordpress.com/get-involved/our-mentoring-program/>
- Southeastern Library Association (SELA) Mentorship: <http://www.selaonline.org/sela/mentoring/10.html>

### **Being an Effective Mentee**

Mentors obviously play a crucial role in mentoring as they provide guidance and advice to mentees, but a mentor does not actually drive the relationship. The mentee is responsible for determining what the focus of the mentoring is and what support they need from the mentor. Often mentoring programs will focus on training for mentors alone. Without proper preparation, mentees can fail at this crucial task and that will ultimately lead to failure in the mentoring relationship.

New employees and new professionals generally lack confidence in their new roles and it is not surprising that they expect a more experienced person to take the lead in guiding them. However, there is no way for the mentor to know what skills, knowledge, and experience the mentee

already possesses. As mentors often have limited time to engage in mentoring, mentees should be coached to reflect on their needs and articulate those effectively to the mentor. A training session for mentees will help them set realistic expectations and goals as well as enter the mentoring program with confidence. Without these key elements, the mentoring relationship will fail as mentees will often have unrealistic expectations, not commit enough energy and effort needed for a successful outcome of the relationship, and not be able to engage in high level debate. The resulting discussions will tend to be shallow, rather than uplifting and rich in advice. Training for mentees will lead to greater satisfaction for all parties.

### **Being an Effective Mentor**

Mentors need to have experience in dealing with many types of problems in the workplace so that they can provide useful advice to mentees about what to do or not to do in particular situations, how to deal with certain challenges, and what unwritten rules to follow in order to advance in an organization or profession. Mentors must also have effective communication skills so that they can provide useful feedback and help mentees think through strategies and decisions.

One of the most important things for a mentor to do is to give a positive outlook on the organization and profession to the mentee. Negative attitudes spread like a flu virus in the fall. New employees or professionals are particularly susceptible to catching a negative attitude early in their careers, which can lead to dropping out of the profession in a short time. Derailing a young person's career should not be the goal of any mentor.

As in the case of mentees, training for mentors leads to increased satisfaction with the mentoring experience and makes the whole process more comfortable and successful. In training, participants may realize that they are not expected to have all the answers, learn to build trust, and stay non-judgmental and supportive. Mentors should think about their goals related to joining the program. Articulation of this information will provide the organizing committee with more data to match participants and therefore will increase the rate of success.

### **Benefits of a Successful Mentoring Program**

A good mentoring program is beneficial for both parties. Professional associations benefit from mentoring programs by the increased engagement and goodwill of the members that participate in mentoring. The more positive experience members have, the more likely they are to volunteer for future association programs.

There are many potential benefits for mentors who participate in a successful mentoring program. Mentees can offer them new perspectives on work issues and update mentors on changes in the profession that they have recently studied in coursework. Mentoring allows mentors to reflect on current practices as they explain them to mentees and prompts them to reassess the effectiveness of these routines. Through the program, mentors demonstrate their commitment to the organization. They also may feel happier because their work and experience get validated by the organization and other professionals.

Mentees, on the other hand, can gain quick insight into their work and how it affects others. They can adjust to their new roles with greater ease and quickly learn "the ropes" of the organization. They will often feel more valued when they see that the time of more senior colleagues is being invested into their success. They can also learn of career paths that may not be readily apparent and develop wider professional networks both inside and outside of their company.

### **Conclusion**

Being successful in a mentoring program requires investment from all parties. Careful planning and research into best practices can dramatically increase a program's chance of success. Terms of reference for a mentoring relationship need to be drawn up, making it clear what is expected from all parties involved. Investing in training of both mentors and mentees will diminish frus-

tration, lead to productive conversations, and increase satisfaction for participants. Mentoring is a two-way learning relationship with benefits for both parties if they are properly prepared for their roles. To ensure that a mentoring program is meeting the needs of all involved, an evaluation component should be included that will provide feedback to organizers about program strengths and weaknesses. This will ensure that a valuable mentoring program is continuously improved over time.

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